

YOGA IN AMERICA...WHAT WENT WRONG?
Redefining an Ancient Art, Science, and Philosophy
for the Twenty-First Century

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Much attention has been given to yoga in recent years. Open any fitness magazine and you will likely see a reference. Yoga has made the covers of *Time* and *New York* magazines. Once resistant physicians now regularly recommend yoga to their patients. Stars like Sting have contributed to a surge of visibility for and curiosity about yoga practice. Plenty of enthusiasts are participating in some form of yoga. Yet, the public at large remains confused about just what yoga is and how it can apply to them. Everyone is talking about yoga; but yoga as presented to the American public is in many cases misleading in terms of historic authenticity, and often fails to deliver a truly meaningful service in the interest of individual and social health. The confluence of yoga with American culture raises a complex set of issues, but their resolution is ascertainable for those who take time to study the problem.

Yoga is ultimately concerned with the deconstruction of one's personal (*karmic*) history in the interest of Self-knowledge. Complete individual autonomy (*freedom*) is not attainable for those who are content to live merely as products of the historical forces that shape their world-view. Accordingly, we neglect the study of our personal histories at our spiritual peril. The same is true for society at large. Social progress requires knowledge of where we are which is only understandable in terms of where we have been. The yoga industry could use a dose of its own medicine regarding knowledge of the historical forces that shaped its existence as a contemporary phenomenon. In fact, the popular yoga movement in the United States was largely conceived during the Vietnam era, and its collective world-view (this is not to suggest a purely monolithic phenomenon) is visibly influenced by the prevailing ethos of those times.

The counter-culture, which generally coincides historically with the Vietnam era, was like a great glacier that swept yoga up along with everything else in its path. It is my observation that there were two consequences quite detrimental to a more healthy progression of yoga into American culture. First was an invasion of the country by poor representatives of the Indian yoga tradition, opportunistic individuals who betrayed their tradition as they betrayed the trust of their new followers, undermining the image of yoga and yoga teachers. Second was the inculcation within yoga circles of a deep seated misgiving about whether State and Federal governments can be fully

trusted to guarantee civil rights and liberties. These misgivings linger and have, to date, prevented establishment of a yoga profession in the United States. The absence of a professional environment for delivery of yoga to the public permits players of limited understanding or accomplishment to represent their teaching as if it were grounded in a higher authority. In addition, the lack of a professional context for yoga has allowed for unrestrained commercial exploitation that reduces yoga to another source of titillation. What follows is an examination of popular American yoga and of the liabilities associated with its history. It is a story that must be told if we are to steer the ship of American yoga back onto a course that is in harmony with its historic purpose: to serve the physical, emotional and spiritual health of a modern democratic population through the application of an elite yet timeless tradition and its attendant technologies.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

In the decades leading up to the 1960s, a quiet revolution was occurring with respect to the dissemination of eastern philosophies and psycho-spiritual technologies to the west. In 1893, Vedanta* scholar Swami Vivekananda, who called Raja-yoga “the science of religion,” addressed the World Conference of Religions held in Chicago, Illinois. He caused quite a stir wearing the turban presented to him by his friends back home, simply to keep his head warm. The placement of this significant event in the history of yoga within the context of the Great Columbian Exhibition, The Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, was apropos. The Exhibition was a real coming out for a post reconstruction United States, eager to take its place as a world player in commerce, technology and education. Scott Joplin regaled fairgoers with his hot new rags. The world’s first Ferris Wheel, replete with electric lights, was a sensation.¹ The time was ripe for contact with a representative of a great Indian tradition. Intellectual groundwork for a genuine dialogue with exponents of eastern philosophy had also been laid in American society through the work of the New England Transcendentalists (1830-1860). Henry David Thoreau had a copy of the Bhagavad-Gita, and saw himself as a self-styled yogi, performing his ablutions in the morning at Walden Pond. In their effort to escape the limits of the theology associated with a Unitarian God, the Transcendentalists developed a doctrine remarkably eastern in outlook:

In its deepest reaches Transcendentalism was a quest for authentic religious experience. It rejected forms, creeds, rites, and verbal explanations and sought to penetrate the heart of things by a direct immediate encounter with reality. Its objective, Emerson announced, was an original relation with the universe.²

*There are six *darshana* (schools of thought) in classical Hindu philosophy of which Vedanta is considered the principle. The other five are *Mimamsa*, *Sankhya*, *Nyaya*, *Vaisheshika* and *Yoga*.

Vivekananda's sojourn in the Chicago area had a notable and lasting impact. By 1903 *The Yogi Publishing Society* was producing books under the pseudonym, Yogi Ramacharaka. I am familiar with two volumes, *Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism*, and *Hatha-yoga or The Yogi Philosophy of Physical Well Being*. Accounts differ as to whether there ever was a Ramacharaka, but these works were likely written by William Walker Atkinson, who reportedly gave up his Chicago law practice to devote himself to yoga. Baba Bharata, has been floated as Atkinson's teacher, but that name is likely a stand-in for Vivekananda, with whom Atkinson had several meetings. If Atkinson is indeed the author of these books, then he must have been a very quick study because they constitute a brilliant exposition of many classical yoga doctrines. Here is what he says about Hatha-yoga:

...that branch of yoga philosophy which deals with the physical body—its care—its well being—its health—its strength--and all that tends to keep it in its natural and normal state of health. It teaches a natural mode of living and voices the cry which has been taken up by many of the western world: "Let us get back to Nature," excepting that the Yogi does not have to *get* back for he is already there...³

Just after WWI another important Indian teacher, beloved Kriya-yoga master, Paramahansa Yogananda, came to the United States. Yogananda's profound and provocative *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) included an account of his remarkable vision of what would become his ashram (yoga center) in the west. Originally sent in 1920 as India's delegate to an International Congress of Religious Liberals in Boston, he remained to establish the Self Realization Fellowship, headquartered in Los Angeles, California. The fellowship purchased a compound of white structures with red roofs resting atop a wooded Mt. Washington overlooking the City of Angels which perfectly matched what he had foreseen years earlier in India. His holy presence and teaching impacted a large number of people in the area. The Los Angeles Times reported on January 28, 1925, that Yogananda's address at the Philharmonic Auditorium attracted a capacity crowd with some six-thousand gathered outside, unable to enter. The attraction: "A Hindu invading the United States to bring God in the midst of a Christian Community, preaching the essence of Christian doctrine."⁴ The Fellowship continues Yogananda's legacy in India and the United States today.

Colonial India's relationship to Great Britain naturally exposed the ruling elite to yoga and Hindu philosophy; and those who perceived their inherent value and potential either took up the practice itself or contributed to dissemination of the ideas through writing. British School Master Ernest Wood went to India in 1910 where he served in several capacities, including the first Organizing Secretary of the Indian National University. Profoundly impressed with Indian philosophical and

psychological systems of thought, he penned *The Occult Training of the Hindus* in 1931. Renamed *Seven Schools of Yoga*, this work remains as a testament to the ability of a western academic to embrace and explicate nuances of yoga thought with depth and clarity. Wood came to the United States in 1945 as President and Dean of the American Academy of Asian Studies.⁵ An interesting fact, largely forgotten in yoga circles, is that it was Lord Yehudi Menuhin, world renowned and beloved British violinist, who introduced Hatha-yoga master BKS Iyengar to the West as “my yoga guru” in 1952. They developed a special bond, camaraderie, and mutual respect that lasted until Menuhin’s passing in 1999. Menuhin added yoga to the curriculum of his school of music for young aspirants. Iyengar’s famous encyclopedic, *Light on Yoga*, was published in 1966 with a forward written by none other than Lord Menuhin. All those interested in yoga study would do well to reread Menuhin’s preface and reflect on the poetry of his testimony to Iyengar and his art. Here is a sample:

It [yoga] is a technique ideally suited to prevent physical and mental illness and to protect the body generally, developing an inevitable sense of self-reliance and assurance. By its very nature it is inextricably associated with universal laws: for respect for life, truth, and patience are all indispensable factors in the drawing of a quiet breath, in calmness of mind and firmness of will.⁶

Yoga also began to impact Continental Europe, Eastern Europe (my Polish students tell me of a thriving yoga scene in their native country today) and Scandinavia. Having traveled the world extensively, and having met with several Indian teachers and mystics, Russian born Madame Helena Blavatsky, 1831-1891, co-founded the *Theosophical Society* whose purpose was to propagate the tenants of eastern occultism. Blavatsky championed yoga and argued that westerners would profit from adopting the doctrines of karma and reincarnation. There was controversy over her claim to occult powers and her writings were not entirely respected in academic circles, but she helped pave the way for those who would establish yoga on a more sound academic basis. Mircea Eliade, the brilliant Romanian religious scholar, lectured in the *École des Hautes-Études* of the Sorbonne and served as chairman of the Department of History of Religions at University of Chicago. His epic volume, *Yoga. Immortality and Freedom*, was originally published in French as, *Le Yoga. Immortalité et Liberté* by Librairie Payot, Paris, 1954. Eliade dedicates his work to his patron, Maharaja Sir Manindra Chandra Nandi of Kasimbazar and to his guru, Professor Surendranath Dasgupta, with whom he studied for many years in India.⁷ My dog-eared copy, along with Georg Feuerstein’s *Yoga Technology of Ecstasy* (Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc.1989), have been indispensable to the formation of a reasonable comprehension of yoga history and philosophy. The year 1959 saw the introduction of a volume, *Hatha-yoga: An Advanced Method of Physical Education and Concentration*, (printed in London) to rival *Light on Yoga* for its penetrating discussion of the evolution of the

human form and how Hatha-yoga relates to this form through medical and spiritual sciences. Author Shyam Sundar Goswami, born 1891 near Calcutta, founded a school of yoga in Stockholm after his senior students captured the imagination of physicians and other enthusiasts with their lecture demonstrations in 1949. Following is this incredible master's definition of Hatha-yoga, taken from his preface.

Hatha-yoga is a method for the development of concentration and power of control by a process of super-refining the mind, of which purification, vitalization and control of the body form an intrinsic part...It has been explained why we need Yoga exercise. To meet the demand of the higher order of mental life, the habit of continuous exercise of the dynamic type had to be modified and a new pattern of exercise incorporated. So, in Yoga, the meaning of exercise has been extended and its application broadened. In a lower order of mental life the contemplative side remains underdeveloped and the active side is uncontrolled. From the Yogic point of view, exercise is intimately related to both aspects of man — contemplative and motional.⁸

The reader may not have heard of Shyam Goswami, but the name Alan W. Watts will be familiar to anyone with an active interest in eastern thought. *The Way of Zen*, written by Mr. Watts in 1957, drew high praise, "...the most explicit and orderly account of Zen Buddhism that has yet appeared in English."⁸ It seems that with the dawn of the Space Age, eastern teachings generally and those of yoga in particular were taking a firm hold in the west. This was an invasion of persons and ideas that was spiritually earnest yet sober, grounded in science and academic accountability, constructive and adaptable, and generally accepted as natural despite the other worldly appearance of the oriental exponents themselves. But something was about to happen, something that would thoroughly disrupt the progress of yoga in the U.S. The social and cultural turmoil that ensued placed American yoga into a tail-spin from which it has hardly recovered.

GOTTA REVOLUTION

"Volunteers" *Jefferson Airplane*

In August of 1964, *New York Post* reporter, Al Aronowitz, drove up to the Del Monico Hotel in Manhattan after dark on a mission to facilitate an historic encounter between the day's avowed titans of youth culture. Aronowitz had been hired to cover Beat writer Jack Kerouac in a way calculated to defame him, but the plan backfired. Having met the great author and figurehead, he became enthralled by the man and his work and became a champion of Kerouac, promoting popular awareness of his cause. Kerouac regularly used drugs in the interest of mind expansion, both alone and with friends, and this important component of Beat culture was not lost on the journalist.

Aronowitz had another young friend and hero, Beat poet Robert Zimmerman, aka Bob Dylan, who would catalyze the next phase of what came to be known as the counter-cultural revolution.

Apparently a man with the connections to match his insight into popular culture, Aronowitz had brought the well supplied Dylan to the Del Monico to meet and get high with none other than those four lovable —at least until this moment—mop tops from Great Britain, who knew and admired the poet's work.

Dylan was famously uninformed about whether the Beatles actually *did*. In fact; they *hadn't*; but by all accounts the night of their introduction to the sacred herb was a night to remember. "It's as if we're up there," remarked Paul McCartney to Derek Taylor, author of *It Was Twenty Years Ago Today*, "up there looking down on us!" And George Harrison would write later, "It was an amazing night and I woke up thinking: What was that? Something happened last night. I felt really good." ¹⁰

The combination of expanded consciousness, innate genius, and the literary influence of Dylan and the Beat aesthetic propelled the Fab Four into an explosion of creativity that would result in music that transcended the medium of Rock and Roll. Although the Beatles' exquisite puppy love still inspires today, the tracks on *Rubber Soul*, produced the following year in 1965, represented a radical departure in form. "Norwegian Wood", "Michele", "Girl", and "In My Life" are tender, poetic, haunting, and characterized by subtle harmonic modulations. Evidence of an emerging spirituality within the band members jumps out at the listener in "The Word." Here John Lennon sings with great intensity: "Say the word and be like me; say the word and you'll be free; say the word I'm thinking of; have you heard the word is love?" Of course, the Beatles did not grow in a vacuum: musically, psychedelically (they all ended up taking LSD with McCartney being the last to try but the first to admit publicly) or spiritually. Great pop idols: The Doors, Jefferson Airplane, Buffalo Springfield, The Beach Boys, The Grateful Dead, The Rolling Stones, Jimmy Hendrix and Janis Joplin were in the vanguard of a prolific musical culture characterized by youth, love and sexual freedom, drugs, spirituality, and social commentary and activism. Bear in mind--and this is a point to which we will return--the Beatles were not only the champions of the vanguard; by 1965 they were already ahead of their time and would evolve beyond many of their contemporaries. Again from *Rubber Soul*: George Harrison, clearly concerned about the burgeoning numbers of starry-eyed followers of the counter-culture, admonished them to "Think for Yourself."

The counter-culture itself thrived within a broader context of social movements and the times, however heady, were troubled, violent, and characterized by a cultural divide that went beyond parental concern over raucous music and the loosening of

sexual mores. Although progressive structural change was occurring regarding civil rights with passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, it was too little too late for a northern African-American urban underclass. The “long hot summers” of 1964 and 1965 saw an eruption of black violence in Harlem, Rochester, NY, and Los Angeles neighborhood, Watts, where thirty-four died. White vigilantes in Mississippi bombed and burned two-dozen black churches between June and October, 1964; Jim Crow South was not going down without a fight. Detroit erupted during 1966 and 1967. It is easy to comprehend the rise of the *black power* and *black separatist* movements.

The Warren court was contributing to profound structural change regarding the Sixth (Gideon v Wainright, 1963) and First (New York Times Co. v Sullivan, 1964) Amendments. Here again, the pace of change was much too slow for the founders of the *Free Speech Movement* in Berkeley, CA, which was the beginning of the campus unrest that stormed the nation and culminated with the tragic events at Kent State in 1970. Port Huron, Michigan was the birthplace of the *Students for a Democratic Society*, whose members wisely recognized that the comfort and complacency of their baby boom upbringing did not absolve them from activism in the face of “events too troubling to dismiss”¹¹. Inspired by the FSM and SDS, the *New Left* was formed from individuals associated with several groups: anarchists, pacifists, Marxists, Black nationalists. “Up Against the Wall” was their famous slogan. John Lennon offered his view of the New Left in “Revolution,” 1968, wherein he emphatically distanced himself from, “minds that hate,” “Marxism á lá Chairman Mao,” and admonished people to “free their minds instead.” And let us not forget Betty Friedan, who in 1963 (*The Feminine Mystique*) revitalized the feminist movement that had lain dormant since acquisition of the vote with the *Nineteenth Amendment* in 1920. One thing all players had in common was hatred for the war in Vietnam, which was dramatically escalated in 1965 with *Operation Rolling Thunder*, a campaign that would ultimately result in the dropping of more bombs than were dropped by the U.S. in all of World War II.

The collective social movements were largely aligned against the heavy-handedness of: corporations and capitalism, government and especially the military, and college administrations. “Up the Establishment!” became a familiar refrain. Obviously the *users* were having trouble with the police who were bent on spoiling the party. Despite the fact that the dire warnings about the use of marijuana and LSD (outlawed in 1966) are proven myths perpetrated by members of the establishment whose business and social standings were threatened by a changing world-view, drug busts were a major theme of the times. Allen Ginsberg writes:

People seeing it [LSD] illegalized, having had their own experience of it, mind-manifesting and metaphysical, realized that the

government had no business intruding, getting on our backs, and that they were trying to repress an alteration of perception—not merely behavior but perception itself!—and it became a classical situation that the government was outlawing an elixir that had some real scientific usefulness as well as general democratic usefulness for those who were interested. ¹²

To this day, the draconian (and likely unconstitutional) New York State drug laws and the so-called *drug war* at large stand—in my view—as utterly ill advised and failed public policy. The action’s of Mayor Daly’s police mob during the 1968 Democratic Convention would have made even sideliners wonder if perhaps the regime was fascist to the point of having to be overturned. Indeed, many individuals of the “America, love it or leave it!” persuasion thought that government sponsored clubbing and even shooting were perfectly appropriate punishments for rebellious hippies. Given this backdrop, the counter-cultural revolution—ca 1963-1973—despite its excesses and vanities, should be remembered as a necessary and important historical movement toward social justice; and it is not hard to sympathize with the surge of libertarianism which took root throughout a large segment of society at the time. One can only hope that out of the tragedies, such as the loss of Dr. King, Robert F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, fifty-eight thousand soldiers, many southern blacks, and the four at Kent State, we have advanced as a society if only a little. There is much to be done regarding realization of the hopes and dreams of the Woodstock generation and their contemporary elder supporters. Those presuming to wield unique superpower status in world events in the 21st century would do well to bear this in mind. We *shall* overcome.

ENTER THE GURU

Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, the crowning achievement of the counter-culture and its great anthem, was released in June of 1967. The music inspired a generation, filling the air during “the summer of love.” Although the Beatles’ most beautiful and timeless music would be produced for their swan song, Abbey Road in 1969, Sgt Pepper had it all: fantasy, mystery and magic, darkness, sadness and humor, searing tonalities, exquisite rhythms, and offered up an endearing slice of British life. Harrison, who sadly passed away November 29th 2001, was never doubted for the sincerity and thoughtfulness of his spirituality. His contribution, “Within You and Without You,” anchored the album’s spirituality, drawing heavily on Indian instrumentation, and helped to complete it as work of art.

We were talking--about the love that’s
gone so cold and the people,
Who gain the world and lose their soul

they don't know—they can't see—are
you one of them?
When you've seen beyond yourself
then you may find, peace of mind, is
waiting there—
And the time will come when you see
we're all one, and life flows on within
you and without you.

As if the music wasn't enough, the cover jacket, a provocative work of mod art, tells a whole story in itself. The background characters (see Derek Taylor's *It Was Twenty Years Ago Today* for a full list) are all heroes of the lads themselves. Three of George's selections are noteworthy for our discussion: Yogavatar Lahiri Mahasaya, Harbinger of Kriya Yoga (1828-1895), his disciple Sri Yukteswar, and the latter's disciple, none other than Paramahansa Yogananda (died 1952), referenced in our first section, "Humble Beginnings." Considering his tender age, 24, and full time preoccupation with his guitar, George Harrison was a remarkable thinker: "One of the things after LSD was this sudden desire within me to find out about the science of God consciousness, the science of realization." ¹³ The Beatles, were two months away from their first encounter with a living Indian guru.

Maha means great and *Rishi* means *Seer*, as in the *Rishis* who produced the Vedas, the original texts of Indian religion and philosophy, ca 2500 BCE. The name, *Maharishi Yogi*, therefore, implies a reborn sage of great mastery. But, as we know, names can be deceiving. The Maharishi Yogi of TM fame was having success on American college campuses by 1965. On August 24, 1967 the first meeting occurred between the Maharishi and the Beatles at the Hilton Hotel in London. The following day their entourage and other noteworthies, including Mick Jagger and Marianne Faithfull, made their way to Bangor, Wales for a "Think-in, a lecture on transcendental meditation by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, leader of a Kashmir Cult." During a special audience, he told the Beatles: "You have created a magic air through your names. Now you have got to use that magic influence on the generation who look up to you. You have a big responsibility." The man known as the giggling guru saw the Beatles as a potentially major voice for his Transcendental Meditation. For the moment, they had every reason to be enamored with the relationship. Said John Lennon at the time: "We don't regret taking drugs but we realize that if we'd met Maharishi before we had taken LSD, we would not have needed to take it." ¹⁴

With consummation of a relationship between the icons of the counter-culture and an exotic Indian holy man, (George Harrison's spiritual inspiration actually came from Ravi Shankar), all things Hindu were definitely in. The appropriation of elements from Hindu culture (Native American culture was also food for exploration) was a

perfectly natural and timely adventure for the counter-culture, whose exponents were seeking to escape the confinements of cold war America. Flamboyant clothing, bright colors, paisley images with their implied sexuality, beads and pendants, and long untamed hair became de rigueur for an authentic counter-culturalist. Professors at American colleges and universities wearing Nehru shirts held court in the manner of self-styled gurus.

The critical point to understand is that the cultural experimentation of the times did not en masse entail a genuine investigation into eastern disciplines for their transformative potential. Although the counter-culture may have been quick to embrace Indian masters as their own, the latter did not necessarily return the compliment. Ravi Shankar was not about to allow himself to be “co-opted by the counter-culture without making an attempt to set the record straight. [He] was quick to state his position as being outside the counter-culture and firmly on the side of study, rigorous application to ancient form and custom combined with a search for perfection and real purity.”¹⁵ The problem for American yoga is that—owing to the pervasive impact of the counter-culture and its association with Indian spiritual arts—yoga became largely perceived as a province of the counter-culture in the public mind. The association created an inaccurate, inappropriate, and ultimately damaging image of yoga practice. Workaday individuals who continue to sneer when someone mentions yoga are reacting not to yoga proper, but to the notion of a suspiciously artificial practice created largely by and for Americans whose experimentations thrived within a very situational context. One can imagine the expression of a hippie at a *happening* cum “yoga” event during the height of the era: “Like hey man, peace; like ‘Om.’ Shake your tambourine.” We have yet to extricate our selves from this unfortunate association, which continues to drown out the truth about yoga, preventing it from becoming genuinely useful as a method of personal and social transformation.

The honeymoon between the Beatles and Maharishi did not last long. The yogi quickly moved in to capitalize on his association with the biggest marketing engine on the planet, and requested that twenty-five percent of Beatle income be deposited into a Swiss Bank in exchange for his teaching.¹⁵ He shamelessly exploited his assumed role, “Beatles Spiritual Teacher,” to enhance his reputation even after repeated warnings to desist by representatives of the band; the members themselves were forced to make the case in person before he would acquiesce. The final straw occurred in 1968 when the band went to see Maharishi in Rishikesh, India. A member of the party was the nineteen-year-old Prudence Farrow. The holy man, age 56, was officially *celibate*; but it didn’t prevent him from making known his interest in Ms. Farrow. “We made a mistake,” said Paul. “We thought there was more to him than there was. He’s human. We thought at first that he wasn’t.” John would say years later: “There is no guru.

You have to believe in yourself. You've got to get down to your own God in your own temple. It's all down to you, mate."¹⁷ Mr. Lennon produced two songs about the incident: "Dear Prudence", written as a comfort for the young lady who must have been pretty rattled, and "Sexie Sadie"--originally titled "Maharishi"--which begins: "Sexie Sadie, what have you done? You've made a fool of everyone." The Beatles matured rapidly through mind expansion via drugs, then through a search for God consciousness by way of the guru, to arrive at genuine self-reliance. (Think of Yehudi Menuhin's preface.) They gave us the warning; they showed us the way. Was anyone listening?

WHERE'S THE WHEAT?

Carl Jung is known for his famous opinion on whether westerners should practice yoga. He said, no, because 'they wouldn't be able to separate the wheat from the chaff.' The nutritional deficiency that characterizes the American yoga scene bears testimony to his insight. There is a real irony in the cult of guru worship--read, "chaff"--that erupted following the Maharishi story. If one word describes the target of rebellion during the sixties, it would be *patriarchy*. Yet the movement toward experimentation with utopian lifestyles brought seekers right into the laps of another kind of *Big Daddy*, gurus like Amrit Desai. Desai was by all accounts a talented and charismatic practitioner of Hatha-yoga, who trained under *Kripalvananda*. During a 1970 practice session in Philadelphia, the yogi, with wife and students present, had a *kundalini* (life energy) awakening that resulted in a spontaneous, involuntary expression of *asanas* (postures) through his body. He apparently determined that he could recreate the experience. Heros must have a requisite "Peak Experience" to establish their greatness as leaders, and Desai and his followers had one that was good enough for them to establish him as guru of *Kripalu Yoga*, named in honor of his teacher. The group purchased a Jesuit monastery in Lennox MA in 1973. The institution prospered under the leadership of *Gurudev* (a most reverential and endearing term) and "*The Kripalu Experience*" became a common phrase associated with the marketing of programs offered at the ashram.

Although his kundalini experience was born of a legitimate practice, Desai's interpretation of its applicability to pedagogy was fatally flawed. He analyzed the progress of Hatha-yoga in terms of three stages: *Willful Practice* (here the practitioner grapples with the posture at a physical level), *Surrender* (after a period of refinement, the practitioner relaxes deeper into the posture), and *Flow*, which arises from application of the first two. Not bad metaphors, until you try to determine exactly what constitutes flow. Enlightenment experiences are rare and spontaneous, arising from the practitioner's peculiar constitution, practice, and karmic history. They are fleeting and generally not reproducible. A mature practitioner does not dwell

nostalgically over such an experience, but recommits to practice without regard to when or if he or she will be again so favored. Flow for Desai manifested itself as an involuntary asana sequence, but he and his followers created a style of Hatha-yoga that started with levels one and two, then went to classes in “Flow Yoga,” as if anyone could recreate Desai’s experience by pretending to flow around the room, a patent absurdity. Thus was the demise of authentic practice at Kripalu. But this was just fine with the followers, because it met their agenda perfectly. Remember, the fitness craze had yet to arrive and the seekers of the day were not looking for tough physical and mental training which yoga has always been. They were looking for the softer side of life, given their dissatisfaction with a society based on competition and hierarchy. A kind of *yin* (feminine energy) based practice evolved wherein attention to form was marginalized in favor of ambiance: soft lights, carpets and music, candles and incense, instructor cooing sweetly at the front of the room. This approach was not exclusive to Kripalu, but became the norm across the nation, with Liliias Folan in a significant role as the queen of TV soft yoga. In a subsequent section we will see how the pendulum swung over to a largely *yang* (masculine energy) based model of practice, again compromising the possibility of finding a healthy middle ground.

Desai’s fascination with western psychology and with the promise of its synthesis with Indian philosophy and yoga in particular has born some very real fruit; and Kripalu has made efforts to shore up the *practice* side of the yoga equation. Psychologist and Scholar in Residence, Stephen Cope, wrote a significant work in 1999, *Yoga and the Quest for True Self*, that has drawn high praise from many critics, including Jack Kornfield: “A down-to-earth, wise, spiritually mature and compassionate teaching that integrates the best of yoga and our own western humanity. Destined to be a classic.”¹⁸ But the Desai legacy (he was summarily ousted in 1994 for having multiple affairs while preaching celibacy to his community) has had a deleterious and lasting effect on the public perception of yoga.

His teacher-training program flooded the North-East with minimally trained individuals, armed with little more than a new Sanskrit name and a belief in the inherent superiority of their style. Re-educating the class of enthusiasts who signed up for six-week yoga sessions, at first seduced, but ultimately misled by the neophyte American yogis associated with Kripalu and other institutions, requires continuing effort. Convincing doubters, put off by the fluff and specter of guru worship, that yoga in the right hands is no-nonsense training that can improve fitness and character, is another kind of problem. Not surprisingly, Desai’s institutional heir is not a Hatha-yoga master but an administrative committee. Ironically, the flow myth still informs Kripalu teacher training despite the fact that Desai’s impact has been carefully downplayed in the institute’s official history that cites Kripalvananda (Desai’s teacher) as the *real* influence.¹⁹

Another learned and talented Indian teacher with a dubious background and spiritual history, Sri Swami Rama, founded his U.S. ashram in 1971 in Honesdale, PA. Unlike Desai, he was never removed for misconduct, yet his betrayal of those who looked to him for guidance and instruction was far more serious. The November/December 1990 issue of *Yoga Journal* (still in the days of hand illustrated covers featuring real people and issues) featured environmental illness as the cover story. But the journalistic shocker of the issue was, “The Case Against Swami Rama of the Himalayas,” written by a courageous Katharine Webster. The *Journal* itself was taking a chance, and forfeited ten years of advertising from Rama’s Himalayan Institute. If the allegations are correct--the Institute was placed under a cult watch and eventually settled one case for \$1.9 million in 1997,²⁰ the year of Rama’s death--then the “Sage of the Himalayas” made Amrit Desai look like a Boy Scout. According to the report, Rama was psychologically manipulative, controlling, and physically and sexually abusive to many of his followers. A lesson for all is that people may be psychically powerful and charismatic, intellectually accomplished, even able to articulate deep spiritual truths and yet be severely flawed by way of character. There is great danger of hanging so much on the guru by way of *sublime perfection*, and seekers who place people into such elevated positions do them a disservice, leaving them in an impossible and even lonely place, unable to heal their own problems in the light of day.

Rama’s spiritual heir, Pandit Rajmani Tigunait, has undertaken the official biography of his guru in, *At the Eleventh Hour*, released with great fanfare in the fall of 2001. All references to the problems associated with the “lecherous swami” have been erased from the book’s version of history, save one comment to the effect that swami was sometimes misunderstood and people said unkind things but he forgave his children for turning against him. It is noteworthy that in the age of supposed enlightenment about sexual harassment, the Himalayan Institute has successfully rewritten its dark history by blaming the victim, in this case, many victims. The biography has clearly been written to enshrine Rama as the great guru once and for all. But it is difficult to imagine how it can be in anyone’s interest to foreclose on the truth for the sake of the comforting belief that Big Daddy was all we wanted him to be. Although the Institute continues to offer substantial programming and it’s monthly publication, *Yoga International*, is in some respects superior to *Yoga Journal*, the experience in question has inflicted deep wounds and thrown poison into the well of American yoga. I see two reasons why the Institute has been successful at controlling the fallout from Rama’s actions. First, it is simply human nature for inbred groups with something to protect to cover up whatever shenanigans may be going on so they can stay in business. What is more important to understand for the current discussion, is that the non-profit institutes, the great monolithic bastions of yoga, operate outside of any regulating authority that might serve as a check on the quality of educational

services provided or, by extension, on the behavior of the leadership itself.

BLISS FOR SALE

The hippies who drove Mustangs and VW Beetles, grew up and became yuppies with families ferried by Dodge Caravans and more recently SUV's. In their exuberant youth, they may have thought of yoga as a way to get *uptight outta'sight and in the groove*. But all that stress of money-making and raising kids has now made them just want to *relax*, and American yoga was adaptable enough to be remade to fit the needs of the times. Jon Kabat-Zinn (*Full Catastrophe Living*) deserves credit for showing us that a guy in a suit can do meditation (*Dhyana-yoga*). But the program he evolved, *Conscious Stress Reduction through Mindfulness Meditation*, although originally based on an authentic Vipassana tradition, became largely disconnected from that tradition. Now mental health professionals can learn *Stress Reduction* via *Mindfulness Meditation*, not from meditation masters, but from other mental health workers who may themselves have never met a meditation master. Kabat-Zinn also incorporated watered down (nothing new) Hatha-yoga into his program. The Hatha-yoga handouts provided are a joke. But it is no joke because people can and do injure themselves attempting to practice from such materials. Moreover, this kind of presentation of Hatha-yoga to the public lends additional credibility to the damnable myth that yoga is easy, anyone can do it, and much worse, that anyone can teach it. Yoga—whether Hatha or Dhyana—is not a relaxation pill and shouldn't be sold to the public as such. And as far as I am concerned, anyone who accepts money for Hatha-yoga instruction should have the same level of training as a physician and be committed to the practice on a full time basis. If you accept that proposition, then it becomes apparent that it would be no more appropriate for professionals like Kabat-Zinn in health related fields to offer a little yoga on the side than it would be for a yoga teacher to offer a little surgery on the side. Yoga will not adequately serve the physical and mental health of the public as long as it continues to be dismissed--and yet exploited--as a cheap road to relaxation.

Capitalizing on the lures of youth, sex, and the need to feel better, the advertising industry has successfully turned yoga into a huge marketing vehicle. The branding of traditional terms like *Zen* and *Shanti*, dilutes their meaning in the public mind. Yoga programs shamelessly play to our weakness for security and pleasure that comes with no cost or effort: "As you enter the sanctuary of our sacred space you'll discover a safe, nurturing environment for exploring the wonder of your being. Feel yourself coming more fully alive as you savor the joy of being passionately present in each moment." ²¹. The programs associated with this kind of language—basically narcissism under color of spirituality—appeal almost exclusively to white people of

means, looking to yoga in the limited sense of how it can relieve them of their stress right now. Yoga is almost invariably portrayed as something you do in an exotic location on the weekend. The participants depicted in marketing materials are commonly posed with vacuous blissed-out faces while doing yoga badly. Why are they always looking upward? Is that where they expect to encounter universal truths about the human condition? Are they reflecting on how yoga may be brought home to their neighborhoods to benefit welfare moms in need of better health care?

Yoga's association with star personalities exacts a cost that comes with the added public exposure. A legitimate artist, Madonna undoubtedly deserved a 1999 Grammy Award for her 1998 CD, *Ray of Light*. One track, "Shanti/Astangi", is a rendition of the *Astanga Yoga Mantram*, a Sanskrit chant in praise of the author of the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali, ca 150 BCE. Students and teacher chant this particular mantra before a Hatha-yoga practice in the Pattabhi Jois (astanga) tradition. Madonna had ample precedent for the appropriation, as artists have always borrowed existing material to be reworked into new forms. All the familiar Classical and Baroque composers liberally appropriated and rescored each other's themes in the days before ASCAP, and the art of jazz is characterized by improvisations around familiar standards. In, 1905 Henri Matisse and the Fauves broke with the French Royal Academy to bring African, Polynesian, Central & South American imagery into their bold new works of art. Madonna—in case you haven't heard—does practice yoga in the Pattabhi Jois tradition, and likely produced "Shanti/Astangi" as a well intentioned tribute to the tradition. The problem is that the recasting and marketing of the chant as a new track by a pop musician undermines further the already confused public perception of yoga. Yogic chants were not conceived as entertainment. Sanskrit chanting is a sacred participatory science wherein precise vocalization of the vowels and consonants and textual meanings are experienced as a unified whole. I sympathize with the difficulty rotund middle Americans must have extrapolating the utility of yoga for themselves when the medium of their exposure to the practice is so divorced from its intended context, and look forward to a time when people learn the philosophies and technologies of yoga from their neighborhood master, rather than from a glamorous superstar.

The case of Christy Turlington and *Yoga Journal* is more troubling than that of Madonna. Ms. Turlington, supermodel, has also taken up the yoga banner and doesn't hesitate to exploit the association to her financial advantage. She is developing her own line of yoga clothing and received major publicity from Vogue Magazine, October, 2002, modeling others' designer ware with a "yoga" motif. See the lithe Ms. Turlington on the cover posed in *danurasana*, a position that would likely be injurious to the typical citizen. The photo spread within reveals her dressed (not exactly) in a \$275.00 bathing suit that would more properly be described as a shoelace. If

Ms. Turlington wishes to shed her modesty (there is nothing inherently wrong with celebrating human nudity) for her career advancement, she has every right to do so. But the implication that her photo presentations and high profile enthusiasm for yoga in and of themselves qualify her as an authority on the subject is ludicrous. Apparently, that doesn't trouble the conscience of Yoga Journal. In 1998, John Abbott, a former investment banker, purchased Yoga Journal and is listed as President and CEO. He tripled the circulation of the once funky rag from ninety to three-hundred thousand. Gone are the illustrated covers, replaced by the all-pervasive yoga-babe-of-the-month in requisite leotard. With a head for business bordering on the cynical, Mr. Abbott installed Christy Turlington as his Editor-At-Large. Although the Journal claims on its website, www.yogajournal.com, that it has remained true to its purpose—and many of the old guard are still present—it is increasingly difficult to see the Journal as a serious resource for yoga professionals.

“Power Yoga” hit the cover of *Yoga Journal* in February, 1995. Although there is controversy over who first coined the term, Beryl Bender Birch, who caused a sensation with her book, *Power Yoga*, deserves much credit for popularizing the Astanga method of Patabhi Jois under the new moniker. According to Birch, her use of the term refers to the inherent power of a traditional (albeit physically demanding) practice to transform your life. However, the cat was out of the bag, and the term can now refer to any variety of athletic yoga without regard for the substantive content of the practice or the place of the teacher within tradition. The current yoga craze is not necessarily replacing the previous paradigm outright. However, athletic yoga has moved American yoga in the direction of providing a better workout; and after all, if it is Hatha-yoga you are doing, then it absolutely should provide a good workout, constructed around the capabilities of those present. The problem with the power yoga movement is that it should be renamed the “aggressive yoga movement.” Throngs of young professionals bend and strain for glory at big city studios like Jivamukti in New York City; injuries are common, not that they don't occur in soft yoga classes. The scene is reminiscent of old boy executives having it out on the squash court during lunch.

The aggressive yoga movement is perhaps best exemplified by purveyor of Hot Yoga (a sequence of twenty-six postures practiced in a room heated to 100 degrees or more), Indian born Bikram Coudhury. He is unapologetically arrogant and macho, and his popularity is way out of proportion with what he actually has to offer by way of content. He may offer a unique workout to a narrow band of the population (although a more reasonable prescription might be to do your training at ambient temperature and avail yourself of an occasional sauna), but it is disastrous for the public perception of yoga that he is commonly mentioned along side Iyengar or Paramahansa Yogananda as if he were their equal. Lost in the center for the past forty years has been a visible and

accepted paradigm of teachers and practices that do justice to yoga which, by definition, is designed to harmonize all aspects of your life, self-surrender, self-assertion, into a meaningful whole. To be sure, a small number of authentic American masters (Dharma Mitra, Norman Alan, Christopher Kilham, Judith Lasater, to name a few) have been quietly plying their trade through the period in question. But our troubled out-of-shape society remains vastly underserved relative to where we need to be in terms of our physical and emotional health, something yoga claims to effect positively through application of its methods. The curious silence of these masters about corruption of their art, and the libertarian ethos that continues to haunt American yoga, conspire to prevent yoga from achieving its potential to improve the fitness of our citizens and of society as a whole. *Fitness Yoga* certifications are now handed out at the end of weekend seminars; money rules. *New Age* meditation is presented not as a path to wholeness, but as a means to “draw abundance from the universe.” Expensive glossy ads promote pricey trips to “paradise” for yoga vacations. We have come full circle, and perfectly embody the materialism we were supposedly trying to escape during the sixties. The lessons of history are ignored at our peril.

TOWARD A NEW/OLD AMERICAN YOGA

The yoga tradition in India has for countless generations been transmitted and upheld in terms of quality control through strict regulatory mechanisms indigenous to its native culture, for example, through the precious master/student relationship, absent the corrupting influence of sycophantic hero worship. When you take a phenomenon like yoga out of its context of peer review and academic integrity (think of Ravi Shankar) and place it into a cultural economic context lacking the modifying effects of oversight, what results is every kind of excess epitomized by American yoga today. Teachers commonly claim in their advertisements to offer the latest greatest “style” of yoga known to the business, yet are under no obligation to substantiate that claim by way of a resume that indicates the substance of their education or degree of technical skill. Ethical guidelines promulgated by U.S. yoga associations generally warn against undue or exaggerated claims. Yet the American yoga scene is rife with outrageous medical claims that would simply be illegal in any other health related industry. For example, nutritional supplement manufacturers may discuss the “structure and function” of their products, but may not establish a quid pro quo relationship between a given product and treatment of given symptoms. Yet within the yoga world, there are individuals in circulation who offer *pranayama* (yogic breath science) as a way to “lose fifty pounds.” Yes, pranayamas can stimulate your metabolism and certain of these might properly be prescribed as a component of a weight loss program. But the prior assertion is the contemporary equivalent of snake oil sales and should be regulated as such.

Health professions in the United States are overseen by state departments of health and education according to our tradition. There may be a number of American yoga teachers who act professionally, but yoga is not, by strict definition, a profession because industry representatives have not petitioned these departments to become professionalized and accredited with respect to teacher training. If yoga is about the reconciliation of life's elements into a natural balance, then some self examination is in order regarding the industry's collective impulse to circle the wagons in defense of any intrusion by government. I do not believe this position serves the interest of the yoga industry and that a less divisive and more constructive position would be to harness libertarianism as a source of healthy and informed skepticism regarding government involvement, and attempt a safe course down the middle. Evidence of the entrenched resistance to professionalization can be ascertained from the *Six Values* of the Yoga Alliance, the largest yoga trade association in the nation today. The second value listed is, "Oppose Outside Regulation." 22

Trade associations are in a natural tension with regulatory agencies and a healthy system depends on a healthy relationship between each side of the equation. The economic interests of a given profession and the public interest are held in the balance of this relationship. The Yoga Alliance cannot possibly fill both functions at once, despite the doctrine espoused in *Value Four*, "Stewards of Integrity in Yoga." Let's not kid ourselves, peer review is the untouchable 'third rail' of American yoga; and even the two-hundred hour minimum teacher training standards underwritten by the Alliance are feared by some as too intrusive...echoes of the do-your-own-thing-generation. The argument that governmental regulation will preclude diversity, *Value Six*, can be met by developing accredited curriculums that insure diversity in training and education of yoga, and to be more specific, Hatha-yoga professionals. With respect to the question of maintaining a connection to tradition within a university environment, curriculums can be designed to insure that would-be professionals are exposed to traditional philosophy teachers and meditation masters, as well as to accredited clinical training. Some will argue correctly that a regulated environment will not guarantee quality one-hundred percent and may in some cases serve to undermine the very quality we seek. Of course, no system can prevent the occasional poor performer from slipping through the cracks; and the potential for acts of personal misconduct related to unresolved human weaknesses and failings—which we all possess in one degree or another—will always be there under the best of circumstances.

We may not be able to create healers, but we can require an appropriate level of training for practice of a given medical art. Nor can we insure morality on the part of every one of our spiritual leaders, but we can expect a Masters Degree in Divinity,

Religious Studies, or perhaps in Sanskrit. Given the present untenable situation within the yoga world, professionalization is the clear choice. I therefore recommend that American yogis relinquish their subconscious fear, if not overt dislike, of government and come to realize that it is much more friend than foe, can serve as the bad cop when it comes to reprimanding teachers for misconduct or non-compliance, can provide tremendous educational resources, can provide the kind of credibility and accountability yoga desperately needs in order to function as a full member of the public health service. I further invite the public to demand that yoga in America take its proper place as a respectable profession, dedicated not to *style, personality, and empty promises*, but to the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the population.

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